

San Leandro woman headed to Ivy League school after overcoming challenges

By Rebecca Parr The Daily Review

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SAN LEANDRO -- SiLin Huang is headed to an Ivy League school in the fall after overcoming the challenges of speaking no English when she immigrated at age 8, growing up poor and missing two years of high school because of a mysterious illness.

"I'm the only child, so my parents viewed me as the hope for the family," she said. "My goal was to get a good education and do well in school, because my parents only completed high school, and I wanted to help them."

That goal was set back because of a still-undiagnosed illness. The straight-A San Leandro High student could not attend school -- she was too sick to even take online courses -- her junior and senior years. But when she recovered, she earned her high school diploma in one year at adult school and has been accepted by Columbia University in New York. In recognition of her accomplishments, she is one of 12 women chosen for the Alameda County Women's Hall of Fame.

"It was hard for me. I was missing out; I couldn't go to school, see my friends, be in the band or play tennis," she said. She was dizzy, had stomach pain and severe headaches.

By the time she regained her health, she was too old to attend regular high school. "I had to go to adult school to get my GED and high school diploma," she said.

Teachers at Castro Valley Adult Career and Education quickly realized her potential, said Sharon Travers, the school's college and career transition specialist.

"She came to us with a very strong academic background; she was college-bound and had been involved in all kinds of activities at school before becoming ill," Travers said.

Huang, now 19, completed two years of coursework in one year, finishing in November.

She became interested in medicine because of what she went through, she said.

"I want to become a doctor and help out in my community," Huang said.

She now volunteers at Stanford Hospital, checking on patients, restocking supplies, answering phone calls, running errands and sometimes translating for patients, though not about medical questions, she said.

After two great-uncles contracted hepatitis B, Huang learned that 1 in 10 Asians and Pacific Islanders have the disease. One of her great-uncles died, and the other has liver cancer.

"Because hepatitis B runs in my family, and about 400 million people in the world are chronically infected, I want to make a change by spreading awareness of this epidemic worldwide," she said.

She joined Team HBV, a group of students organized by Stanford's Asian Liver Center to educate people about hepatitis B.

Huang is eager to start college. "I came from a small town in China, and I want to experience city life. But I really want to come back to San Leandro, because I want to give back to my community. I know a lot of people leave, but the next generation needs people who care about them," she said.

Politics also is a possibility, she said. "I will continue to advocate for hepatitis B awareness and adult schools. Adult schools are very important for people like me and others who need a second chance," she said.

Contact Rebecca Parr at 510-293-2473. Follow her at [Twitter.com/rdparr1](https://twitter.com/rdparr1).

Alameda County Women's Hall of Fame

Luncheon to honor 2014's 12 members

When: 12:30 p.m. March 29

Where: Greek Orthodox Cathedral, 4700 Lincoln Ave., Oakland

Tickets: \$75; www.acgov.org/cao/halloffame or 510-272-3882. Proceeds will go toward a scholarship for Huang.